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“SILENCED WOMEN” IN ALICE WALKER’S *THE COLOR PURPLE*: A FEMINIST READING

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ABSTRACT

This article tries to explore the Spivakian concept of “subaltern silence” in Alice Walker’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple*. Spivak has borrowed the concept of subaltern from post-colonial terminology and introduced it into the mainstream feminism to depict the doubly erased status of Third World women under colonialism and patriarchy. In one of her seminal essays titled “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak claims that the female subaltern cannot speak. The present study argues that a number of Walker’s female characters, undergoing the same racial and patriarchal oppressions that Spivak talks about, lend themselves well to Spivak’s definition of the subaltern woman and represent the silence that she has referred to.

Key Words: Spivak, feminism, colonialism, patriarchy, subaltern, silence

1. INTRODUCTION

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is one of the most influential figures in contemporary literary theory who is often referred to as a ‘feminist Marxist deconstructivist’. Spivak’s importance lies in her re-working of various western theoretical frames to address contemporary political concerns in the postcolonial world. In articulating feminist and postcolonial politics, she raises issues of importance for both First World and Third World feminists. Actually, “[she] challenges the gender blindness of postcolonial theories from a feminist stand point” (Morton, 2003, 61), while at the same time criticizes Western feminist intellectuals for their claims of universality. Therefore, juxtaposing gender and ethnicity, Spivak’s feminist views are often closely connected with those of post-structural feminists and her essays are mostly based on criticizing, revising and adding to their works.

Post-structural feminists believe that “the subject does not exist ahead of or outside language but is a dynamic, unstable effect of language/discourse and cultural practice.” (St. Pierre, 2000, 502). Moreover, the understanding that “knowledge and truth are not ‘pure’ but unstable and contingent” (499), helps these feminist in analyzing the ways in which discourses of power have created certain versions of truth about women that subjugate and marginalize them. One of these truth claims, as Spivak believes, is the idea behind Western “civilizing mission” in the Third World countries. When the presence of extreme patriarchal forces mixes with the racial suppression caused by Western enshrined mission, the Third World woman, as Spivak claims, turns into a silent “subaltern”.

Spivak’s use of the term “subaltern” can be traced back to its first use by Italian Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci, to describe a group of peasants in southern Italy. With the publication in 1988 of the volume *Selected Subaltern Studies* edited by Guha and Spivak, the term was expanded to mean “the general attribute of subordination ... [,] whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Guha, 1988, 35). In her famous and influential essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak develops two examples to show how the political will and voice of the Third World women are silenced under the collaboration of patriarchy and imperialism. First, she discusses the case of *sati* practice, which is the self-immolation of a Hindu widow on the funeral pyre of her husband and second, she recounts the instance of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, an anti-colonial freedom fighter in India who hanged herself in 1926, because she had been entrusted with a political assassination that she could not oppose. In both examples, Spivak believes, “the dubious place of the free will of the constituted sexed subject as female [is] successfully effaced” (1988a, 302). Therefore, by the end of her essay, Spivak concludes that “the subaltern cannot speak” (308). Such a conclusion has been the subject of many interpretations and brought controversial debates among intellectuals. Spivak further elaborates on her views about subaltern women and her capability to speak in an interview that took place at Columbia University: “By ‘speaking’ I was obviously talking about a transaction between the speaker and the listener. That is what did not happen in the case of [Bhubaneswari,]” (1996, 287). She goes on to explain: “the subaltern cannot speak means that even when the subaltern makes an

effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard, [It is this] speaking and hearing [that] complete the speech act" (292).

The present study tries to analyze this subalternity and silence as reflected in Walker's *The Color Purple*. Walker's epistolary novel consists of 90 letters written by Celie and Nettie, two black sisters who live in the rural Georgia. The novel deals with issues of gender and race through two important lines of narrative: while Celie's domestic account of events deals more with gendered oppression, Nettie's account places the first narrative in a wider context of racism and imperialism and offers a post-colonial perspective on the actions of the novel. Celie is fourteen when she writes her first letter to God out of an urge to talk about her suffering. Through her letters, we learn that she is frequently raped and twice impregnated by her stepfather (referred to as Pa), while threatened not to tell anybody but God. Celie's suppression continues in her married life to make an invisible woman out of her. Although by the end of the novel Celie manages to revolt against her oppressors, her long-term subjugation and silence is only taken into account due to the limitation of the scope of the present paper.

2. DISCUSSION

The novel opens with a "paternal injunction of silence" (Abbandonato, 1991, 1106): "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker, 1985, 3). Celie is denied the right to speak from this very first sentence that hangs as an epigraph in italics over the novel. Pa not only rapes Celie, but also chokes her resisting voice. "When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it" (4). In her "Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker's Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in *The Color Purple*", Martha J. Cutter relates Celie's incestuous rape by Pa, to the story of Philomela in Greek mythology. In Ovid's version of the myth, Cutter asserts, "Philomela is raped by her brother-in-law, Tereus, who then tears out her tongue" (2000, 161). Cutter argues that Walker has rewritten the story of Philomela to illustrate the ways in which "a patriarchal society censors and erases woman's voices" by writing "oppressive dictates on women's bodies and minds, destroying both subjectivity and voice" (162).

According to Spivak, "subalternity is a position without identity" (2005, 476). In her first letter, Celie introduces herself to God as "I am I have always been a good girl" (Walker, 1985, 1). As Henry Gate argues, "Celie places her present self ("I am") under erasure, a device that reminds us that she is writing, and searching for her voice by selecting, then rejecting, word choice or word order" (1988, 247). Celie is struggling to create a self through language to set herself free from the network of oppressions imposed on her. According to Spivak, "language may be one of many elements that allow us to make sense of things, of ourselves (1993, 179). However, she questions human being's absolute control over the production of language and believes that language is something "that we cannot possess for we are operated by those languages as well" (1988b, 78).

Celie's first letters are never signed "indicating her difficulty in imagining herself as a writing subject who can assume a human readership" (Dubey, 2009, 162). Although, at the end of the novel, Celie succeeds to come out of men's language and reclaim her "I am", she has a long way to go, before she manages "to git man off [her] eyeball" (Walker, 1985, 204). Writing for Celie "is not the chosen but the desperate alternative to speech" (Cheung, 1988, 165). There is a similar female character, named Pecola, in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*; she is raped by her father and not believed by her mother when she attempts to tell of her rape. This causes a fragmentation of her psyche and leads her to internal colloquies with an imaginary friend. Like Pecola, Out of a desperate urge to share her suffering, Celie addresses her letters to an imaginary figure of God: "whether God will read letters or no" (Walker, 1985, 136). Kaplan believes that, epistolary form is the most suitable form for dramatizing Celie's condition:

while epistolary narratives may well embody a 'desire for exchange' ... they are more likely to depict that desire as a thwarted one: 'letters are repeatedly lost, withheld, seized, misdirected, or misplaced ... An addressee who is absent, silent, or incapable of replying is one of the distinguishing characteristics of epistolarity. (1996, 131)

Later on, Celie understands that God is not listening to her and she accuses him of being ignorant and deaf to her pains. "[D]eepest in my heart I care about God. What he going to think. And come to find out, he don't think. Just sit up there glorying in being deaf, I reckon" (Walker, 1985, 200). The fact is that even Celie's change of addressee from God to her sister Nettie does not change the situation. Celie's letters to Nettie are not intended to be sent and are never read by anyone in the novel. Using Spivak's words, "the subaltern's inability to speak is predicated upon an attempt to speak, to which no appropriate response is proffered" (1994, 62).

The destruction of Celie's subjectivity and voice continues when she is about to marry Albert (referred to as Mr.—), a widower with four children who is no better than her Pa. Celie does not have any say in choosing the man

she is to marry and is completely silent while Pa and Mr.—— are negotiating the details. The passage about the two men's final agreement over Celie resembles a scene in a slave market. Celie recounts: "He's still up on his horse. He look me up and down. Turn round, Pa say. I turn round" (Walker, 1985, 11). For Celie, Albert is not a husband but a Master/Mr.——, that's why until the end of the novel she never calls him by his first name. As Lindsey Tucker points out "for Celie, all men are nondifferentiated forces that exercise power over her, and their names are reduced to an appropriate semiological (and phallic) line (1988, 84). Celie's life at Mr.——'s house is no better than hers with Pa. Mr.—— repeatedly beats and humiliates Celie through their life. In trying to tolerate Mr.——'s abusive behavior, Celie thinks of herself as an inanimate object. "It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree" (Walker, 1985, 23). Celie's passive submission is clearer when she later describes her marital sex with Mr.—— to Shug, Mr.——'s lover: "He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep" (81). Like the *Sati* woman whose body is considered a property of her husband, Celie has no control over her own body and her sexual desires are buried not in a "funeral pyre" but in a "nuptial bed". Celie's alienation to sexual pleasure is so extreme that Shug calls her a "virgin" and tries to help her by awakening her damaged sexuality. "Listen, she say, right down there ... is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody... Here, take this mirror and go look at yourself down there, I bet you never seen it, have you?" (81). In her "French Feminism in an International Frame", Spivak notes that: "All historical and theoretical investigation into the definition of woman as legal object-in or out of marriage; would fall within the investigation of the varieties of the effacement of the clitoris"(1981, 181). Spivak not only talks about the real clitoridectomy imposed on some Third World women as a ritual, she is also concerned with the "symbolic clitoridectomy" or the repression of female sexuality which "has always been the 'normal' accession to womanhood and the unacknowledged name of motherhood" (181). This reminds us of what Cixous says in her *Laugh of Medusa*: "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time" (1976, 880).

Celie takes all the suffering without a word because in her view, "This life soon be over, Heaven last all ways" (Walker, 1985, 44). Although she thinks of her life as worse than being buried, she comforts herself by saying "never mine, never mine, long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along (18). The fact is that Celie's God is the third patriarch who joins Pa and Mr.—— in an "unholy trinity of power that displaces her identity" (Abbandonato, 1991, 1111). As Cheung points out, "[i]n Celie's subconscious mind the almighty God merges with the all-powerful earthly father" (1988, 166). That's why when her dying mother asks her whose baby she is pregnant with, instead of saying Pa's, Celie says "God's" and when she asks what happened to the first baby, she answers: "God took it" (Walker, 1985, 3). After she gets no answer from God, a more mature Celie decides that "the God [she has] been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens [she] know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown" (199). Celie is not conscious of the fact that her image of God as a white man is imposed upon her by her oppressors: males and whites. By defining God as white, Walker mixes the issues of race and gender to show Celie's double oppression.

The other important subaltern character in the novel is Sofia, the robust and outspoken wife of Harpo, Mr.——'s oldest son. Celie describes Sofia as "big, strong, healthy girl ... like her mama brought her up on pork" (33). It is not only Sofia's physical appearance that is so different from Celie, but also her manner and way of speaking. As a black woman, Sofia does not respect the ideological rules of patriarchy and it seems that in her mind, the binary of male/female means nothing. Through the narrative, Celie describes many of Sofia's action as manly. For example, while Sofia is busy mending the roof, Harpo's task is washing dishes and looking after the children. What was mentioned about Sofia's strength and outspokenness may make her an improbable candidate for the Spivakian subaltern woman. However, with the advent of the novel, it turns out that Sofia has to fight more than just the men in her life. While Celie is a subaltern woman under domestic patriarchal forces, Sofia is crushed under racial brutalities. The whole story begins when the white Mayor's wife asks Sofia: "would you like to work for me, be my maid?" and Sofia answers: "hell, no" (90). Sofia's bold "no" to racial enslavement, that has long been practiced by whites, is not tolerated by the mayor; he begins a fight that leads to Sofia's imprisonment for more than twelve years. She is brutally punished in Jail and all her strength and her voice turn to ashes. Celie recalls how Sofia's "impudent tongue is bludgeoned-to seal her mouth" (Cheung, 1988, 164):

When I see Sofia I don't know why she alive. They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her on one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tounge the size of my arm, it stick out tween her teef like a piece of rubber. *She can't talk*". (92, emphasis added)

"while it is possible to use your tongue to combat a racist patriarchy" Pifer suggests, "that system will endeavor to silence such a tongue, even if it must cut it off at the root" (1992, 79). Although Celie's character depicts the depth of gender oppression imposed on black females, Sofia's widens the scope of this oppression to attack on racial and separatist policies. Under such policies, "the person of power must have total control of the tools of

language, knowledge and space. Inversely, the subaltern who is dispensed of these centers is without voice or identity, and is reduced to merely a shadow” (Cheang, 2003, 33). By the end of the novel, we learn that Sofia, who was once so outspoken and bold, has turned into an escaping shadow. Nettie recounts her encounter with Sofia:

And there was her ... looking like the very last person in the world you'd expect to see waiting on anybody ... I spoke. But just speaking to me seemed to make her embarrassed and she suddenly sort of *erased herself*. It was the strangest thing, Celie! One minute I was saying howdy to a living woman. the next minute *nothing living was there. Only its shape.* (Walker, 1985, 137, emphasis added)

From a strong integrated self, Sofia has turned into a subaltern, a non-identifiable “shape” or in Spivakian terms “a divided and dislocated subject whose parts are not continuous or coherent with each other” (1988a, 276). In describing Sofia’s importance to the novel, Bell Hooks points out: “Given all the spectacular changes in *The Color Purple*, it is not without grave and serious import that the character who most radically challenges sexism and racism is a tragic figure who is only partly rescued – restored to only a resemblance of sanity” (1990, 462). Although Celie’s narrative happens inside America, through Sofia’s story walker depicts an internal colonialism against African-Americans.

The next character who is dealt with is Nettie; she is both important as a new narrator and as a tool through which Walker criticizes the theme of colonialism and “adds substantially to the depth and variety of the entire novel” (Tucker, 1988, 91). Nettie is a different character from her older sister. She has always been a studious girl and is sent to school because she seems to be smarter. In order to escape her stepfather’s abusive advances, Nettie gets away from the community and moves to Africa as a missionary. Unlike Celie, Nettie soon assimilates the white culture out of necessity and learns to comply with her environment. According to Abandonato, “Nettie has been imaginatively stunted, her language bleached white and her ethnicity virtually erased. Always the Other Woman, one who lacks an identity of her own, she is cast in the preposterous role of a missionary who attempts to impose the ideology of her oppressors onto a culturally self-sufficient people” (1991, 1109). Although a black African herself, Nettie’s role is more similar to the role of white colonizers who are performing the “civilizing mission” in one of Africa’s tribe named Olinka. Nettie’s absorbing of white hegemony is clear in many of her letters. However, she is not always sure of her missionary ambitions and their usefulness to Olinka people’s life. Her contradictory way of talking about the missionary work makes us decide that her position is actually an ambivalent one, an in-between position which is shifting between cultures. Being an active agent who has the hegemonic tools in hand, she may be linked not to Spivak’s “subaltern category” but to Bhabha’s “third space”. Bhabha’s third space is a “cultural space ... where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences” (1994, 218). This is the same existence ascribed to Nettie: “Neither represented within the white mainstream nor able to construct a selfhood outside it, Nettie is internally divided, experiencing her subjectivity as otherness” (Abandonato, 1991, 1109). Gradually, Nettie becomes aware of the “epistemic violence” done against the African people. The term “epistemic violence” has been used by Spivak to draw attention to the manner in which Western knowledge has been used to justify the violent utilization of political and military force over other non-western cultures. In her first letters, describing the missionary people’s motives for going to Africa, Nettie writes: “Miss Beasley used to say it was a place overrun with savages who didn’t wear clothes ... they [missionaries] spoke of all the good things they could do for the downtrodden people ... People who need Christ and good medical advice” (Walker, 1985, 137). Later in her letters, Nettie contrasts these motives with the reality of African life under colonization and shows how the missionary ideology serves a larger imperialist aim:

Since the Olinka no longer own their village, they must pay rent for it, and in order to use the water, which also no longer belongs to them, they must pay a water tax ... in order to pay ... taxes on the land, and to buy water and wood and food everyone must work. (176)

Nettie depicts men and women who work on large rubber and cocoa plantations that are not theirs. As Berlant argues, for Nettie, the “values that lead the missionary society to think it has a progressive message to deliver to the heathen brethren are shown to be ... misguided, and culturally destructive” (1988, 847). Olinka people resented missionaries because in their view, their position as Nettie understands it, “[was] like that of flies on an elephant’s hide” (Walker, 1985, 242), useless and disturbing.

The depth of this destruction is clearer when we consider the subaltern statues of Olinka females. When colonialism and patriarchy blend into each other, the women’s position is no more than that of an object. As Nettie tells us, Olinka people “do not believe girls should be educated” because in their view, “A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something ... the mother of his children” (161-2). Women are merely valued as a labor power both in the fields and at home and their lives always center around work and their children. This destruction of female’s subjectivity is further seen in two tribal costumes: “facial scarification ceremony” and “the rite of female initiation”. They consist of the scarring or cutting of tribal marks on the faces of young women which will be

followed by female genital cutting. By cutting the face and parts of the genitals, the identity of females are no longer recognizable except in their roles as reproductive mothers and housewives. Although the missionaries try to stop the people from performing such barbaric rituals against females, the tribal people perform the rite more strictly under colonial dominance, as a way to show “they still have their own ways ... even though the white man has taken everything else” (245). Therefore, once again female body is an ideological battleground for male powers. Referring to the glorification of nationalist slogans such as “mother land”, Katrak declares that, “the belief that women even more than men were the guardians of tradition, particularly against a foreign enemy, was used to reinforce the most regressive aspects of tradition (1992, 398). In her co-authored book with Parmar, Walker points out: “When they themselves are being oppressed, people tend to hold on to the practices that they can enforce. As they can most easily enforce things that control women and children, that is what they have tended to do” (1993, 87).

In *In Other Worlds*, Spivak brings up the concept of female genital mutilation or clitoridectomy as a way to assert that the clitoris is actually “a short-hand for women’s excess in all areas of production and practice, an excess which must be brought under control to keep business going as usual” (1988b, 82). Back to the novel, we can see that Tashi, one of the Olinka females, has finally resigned to perform genital circumcision as a way of resisting colonialist intrusion into African culture. The sadder part of it is that these kinds of resistance are not recognized as such, under the dominant colonial structure, and are only interpreted as barbaric tribal actions. That’s why Spivak argues that “once a woman performs an act of resistance without an infrastructure that we would recognize as infrastructure her resistance is in vain” and her voice is not heard (2003, 29). In another occasion she adds that:

We women are foolish if, in the name of some essentialist notion of a real culture, we give in to this kind of thing ... When internalized constraint masquerades as free choice, it allows the female person, it allows her body, to be the theatre on which this strategic game is manipulated ... I think we women are dumb like brute beasts if we don’t notice that it is always on our bodies that this particular strategy gets negotiated and we run behind them, and say “just do everything you can to us”. (1995, 6)

Although Walker has not shown the consequence of Tashi’s choice in *The Color Purple*, we will come to know it from Walker’s later novel. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker devotes a whole novel to Tashi in order to show the depth of her physical and psychological mutilation. Tashi’s character, to use Spivak’s terms, vividly shows “the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (1999, 304).

3. CONCLUSION

In the novel selected for this study, like in many of her novels, Walker considers the position of black women in male-dominated societies. As already observed, the subaltern female characters of *The Color Purple* were subjected to racial and patriarchal forces that had manipulated their subjectivity and silenced their voices. Walker introduces the agents of silence as patriarchal culture, White Christianity and imperialism and shows their important ideological role in constructing the character’s subjectivity. Walker’s use of epistolary form and the fact that Celie’s letters to God and Nettie are never read by anyone in the novel, reinforces this silence. From what has been said so far, it follows that Spivak’s ideas provide a valuable theoretical framework through which the subalternity of Walker’s characters comes to light and that these female characters are good representatives of Spivak’s gendered subaltern who is voiceless.

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